

BREAKING IN:

DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHER MATT EICH

By Aimee Baldrige | Photo by Daryl Peveto / LUCEO

Dorothea Lange's Depression-era migrants, Sebastiao Salgado's tableaux of workers... we've all seen these iconic documentary images. Even if you end up shooting product for De Beers, you will probably have received a healthy slice of early inspiration from the documentarians of the image-making world. But if examining the lives of others through the camera is your calling, how do you follow it in this era of shrinking budgets without ending up feeling like you would fit right into one of Lange's shots from the Dust Bowl? We asked Matt Eich, a twenty-five-year-old documentary photographer with an already impressive resume. Since being honored as the 2006 College Photographer of the Year, Eich has won numerous grants and accolades, and has had his work published, exhibited, and collected widely. He's also a founding member of the LUCEO photographers' collective.

What is your educational background?

I went to Ohio University, where I studied photojournalism in a four-year undergrad program. It was a really strong community of people who were trying to push storytelling and aesthetics forward. I graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Visual Communication.

Describe the path your professional life has taken, from your student days to the present.

My experience has been different than the typical student's. I found out that I was going to be a dad when I was a junior, in early 2007. I started freelancing in 2006. I was trying to pick that up more and more as school went on, especially once I found out that we were going to start a family. I really had to up the freelance game because I knew that there wasn't a staff position that could support us right then. In 2009, I found out that I got into the Joop Swart Masterclass. The best way I could describe it is to say that four years of undergrad studying photojournalism was my incubation and that experience was my birth in photography, because I was exposed to so many visual languages and ways that people can speak with photography in that one place. That was like continued education after school for me. Other than that I've just been working full time with LUCEO and freelancing as much as possible, but also trying to diversify my business outside of the editorial market.

Tell me about LUCEO.

The group came together in 2007. We hadn't gone to school together, but we all knew each other's work. Some of us came together in Atlanta and we slept on David Banks' floor for a few days and hashed it out. Some of us had had previous agency experience and didn't feel that was a sustainable model, so we were looking for something else. We formed as a business in 2009. We fund everything through monthly dues and also give a percentage of all of our assignments and sales to a project support fund, which is how we give out a \$1,000 student award each year. That's also how we fund one another's projects internally.

Why did you decide it was better to found your own collective instead of working with existing organizations?

We're in a day and age where we don't need people to pick up our film off a plane and have it processed while we're overseas on assignment, and we don't really need anyone to answer the telephone for us either. We can be in contact with our clients directly—and we found that most of our clients wanted to be in touch with us directly. There are people we feel we can develop relationships with over time, and we're not in any real hurry because we're trying to find people that we work well with to develop lasting business relationships with. Being a group helps on a number of levels. We're all on the same path. We all have different skill sets that we bring to the table. We're in different locations across the U.S. and in Southeast Asia. Everybody's editing one another's work. We're supporting one another on all of the questions that freelance photographers have, like how much to charge and who to talk to about this, that, and the other.

Which kinds of clients want to deal with you directly?

They're largely editorial. Some of us have tapped into commercial stuff more than others. We're trying to diversify between editorial clients, fine art, weddings on a selective basis, and commercial work for local businesses. Recently I was commissioned by a hospital that was building in the community. They wanted documentary photographs from the area to hang as big prints throughout the building. That was one of the most fun things I've worked on in a while. Sometimes it's multimedia work for editorial publications. We've got a partner network that includes a composer, editors, designers, and Web folks who can build out a team, depending on what the client is looking for. It's called the LUCEO Partner Network.

Are there kinds of clients you work for that you wouldn't have thought of initially, and how do you find them?

Typically we think we need to sell our images as fine art prints for a gallery. But I know a lawyer from Florida who has been a photography

collector for more than twenty years. He's purchased two limited edition photo prints from my Baptist Town series because he collects work from the South. It's significant support. You have to keep your ear to the ground. I have a friend who did a \$38,000 job for an apartment building in Portland, Oregon, and he regularly works for a bank. They'll say, "We're going to open a branch in this community and we want you to go out and make wonderful documentary-style images about this community and they'll be projected in a slide show in the lobby." And he makes really reasonable money from that. You have to think outside of the box.

What do you do during a typical day?

I don't know if there is a typical day. Sometimes I'm at home, doing office work, and there's never any shortage of it. A typical office day would be phoning, invoicing, archiving, pitching stories, writing exhibition and grant proposals, blogging, and trying to feed the social media beast. I'm always really grateful to be home, close to my family. But after two weeks of being home, that means there's no money coming in, so it's time to start thinking about going somewhere.

Most of the time I only travel for assignments or projects. I don't go to a place and shoot on spec or hop to news events. When I'm on the road working on projects I cut myself off from e-mail a little bit and really focus on what I'm doing for a short stretch, like forty-eight hours to a week. Sometimes it's a day shoot around the area within a two- to four-hour drive.

Everyone knows it's complicated to make a career out of being a documentary photographer these days. What is essential to make a sustainable living doing it?

Persistence, obviously, and diversification—not relying on one client to keep food on your table, and not relying on one type of photography. There are so many places that need visuals and storytelling and

emotional images, as opposed to something sterile and stock or studio-produced. If you can find clients across different spectrums and build relationships with them, that can enable you to make a sustainable living. And you shouldn't discount the new trend of crowd funding, the idea of building an engaged audience of people that supports your work. Just trying to learn how to build relationships better is important. There are people you meet sporadically, and they're trying to keep tabs on a whole lot of people, so how do you handle that? Some people are very good at it—consistently staying in touch with people who know your work and can support it, but doing it in a way that's not intruding on them.

What have you done that ran counter to the conventional wisdom but ended up benefiting you?

Photographers working together is not entirely original, but it's still unconventional for a lot of people because they perceive photographers as lone wolves. When we go to New York for our January meeting—we meet in person on a biannual basis and weekly via Skype—we go six people strong into an editor's office and we talk about one another's work. It creates an interesting dynamic; it's kind of counterintuitive.

I don't really think about breaking rules so much because I feel after I walked out of school the rule book kind of went out the window. There was no silver bullet that was going to let me do the work I wanted to do, so I needed to figure all this shit out—not to be a jack of all trades, but to have enough understanding about the different aspects of photography that I can sustain it over a twenty-, thirty-, or forty-year career.

The Internet is the Wild West. Who really knows what's going on or how it's going to be monetized or where publishing is heading? We're figuring it out a little bit at a time and tweaking it as we go. It's a wild ride that we're on for the long haul.

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What advice would you give to people coming out of school now and trying to do what you're doing?

Projects. If any of the LUCEO photographers were slacking on that and not producing some really significant body of work, we would lose momentum. The beauty is that with six photographers, somebody is always working on something. Most of us have two, three, or four projects that we're working on at any time. That really helps validate what you're doing. It keeps you creatively stimulated and fulfilled. Try to find a balance; Don't be a starving artist, but don't forget about what made you interested in photography from the outset. Always continue pursuing that. Make sure the commercial pursuits feed your habit. That's the way most of us work.

And it just doesn't end. There are no work hours, no weekends. There's only time that you make for yourself. I have to make time to work on a project or make time to be a dad and to be a husband, and then I still have to make time for the work. Time management is crucial. That's something I'm learning every day.

The freedom is beautiful and totally crippling at the same time. For people who need structure in their lives it's probably not the best avenue. But those who thrive on chaos to some degree, they can make it work.

What do you hate most about your work?

The office stuff really wears me down. I wish I were out taking pictures more often. If I could split my life between making pictures and being with my family, that would be a much happier balance. Like if e-mail answered itself, perhaps.

What do you love most about your work?

Everything? Sure, it sucks a lot of the time trying to make it and not being sure where the next paycheck is going to come from, but it's totally worth it to meet interesting people on a regular basis. This is my way of understanding things and trying to find out what has importance to me or to someone else, and I'm being paid to do that. I can't really imagine trading that for anything. [1:1](#)

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